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ABSTRACT

The study of ethical decision making has gained considerable interest among organizational scientists due to the widespread occurrence of wrongdoing in business, industry, government and various other institutions. This study examined the effects of priming and organizational level manipulation on an individual's ethical decision-making behavior. Paulhus' (1988) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding, Version 6-Form W (BIDR) was used as the priming manipulation. The BIDR measures two components of socially desirable responding: impression management and self-deception. The organizational level of the person was also manipulated so that the person responsible for the unethical act was either at the same level as the subject or at a higher level. College students (N=51) engaged in an inbasket decision-making exercise where two of the memos involved ethical issues. A 2x2 analysis of variance revealed that a significant interaction was present between person and priming. Examination of the means suggested that when subjects were primed they were most likely to act ethically when someone of their own organizational level was the wrongdoer. However, subjects who were not primed were more likely to act ethically when someone at a higher organizational level was the wrongdoer. No significant main effects were found for priming or organizational level. (Author/ABL)

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Priming and Organizational Level Effects on Ethical Decision Making

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of priming and organizational level manipulation on an individual's ethical decision making behavior. Paulhus' (1988) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Version 6-Form W (BIDR) was used as the priming manipulation. The BIDR measures two components of socially desirable responding, impression management and self-deception. The organizational level of the person was also manipulated so that the person responsible for the unethical act was either at the same level as the subject or at a higher level. Subjects engaged in an inbasket decision making exercise where two of the memos involved ethical issues. A 2X2 analysis of variance revealed that a significant interaction was present between person and priming. Examination of the means suggested that when subjects were primed they were most likely to act ethically when someone at their own organizational level was the wrongdoer. However, subjects who were not primed were more likely to act ethically when someone at a higher organizational level was the wrongdoer. No significant main effects were found for priming or organizational level.

The study of ethical decision making has gained considerable interest by organizational scientists, due to the widespread occurrence of wrongdoings in business, industry, government and various other institutions. Reported cases of manufacturing potentially harmful drugs, illegal campaign payments to public officials, and the production of unsafe products, (Westin, 1982), are examples of the types of unethical acts committed daily.

There have been numerous attempts by organizations to cope with the problem of unethical behavior. Previous research has shown that ethical and unethical decision making in organizations can be viewed as a consequence of both individual and organizational influences (Trevino & Youngblood, 1990).

An individual difference perspective attributes unethical behavior to the result of some character flaw in the individual's personality. Research based on this approach has shown measures such as locus of control (LC) to have a direct and indirect impact on ethical decision making through outcome expectancies Cognitive moral development (CMD) has also been connected to ethical decision making behavior whereby individuals at a higher stage make more ethical decisions (Trevino & Youngblood, 1990; Brabeck, 1984).

An organizational perspective attributes unethical behavior to something in the organizational environment that causes individuals to engage in unethical acts. Trevino & Youngblood (1990) found that vicarious reward influenced ethical decision making indirectly through outcome expectancies. Laczniak &

Inderrieden (1986) found that a formal s ed organizational policy concerning ethical conduct, threat of dismissal, and direct punishment of unethical behavior significantly reduced unethical decision making.

However in the long run, organizations must not only be concerned with what policies and disciplinary actions improve behavior but also why some managers engage in ethical behavior and others do not (Laczniak & Inderrieden, 1987). We need to understand the cognitive processes people use in making ethical decisions in order to better understand ethical decision making.

The primary focus on the present study was on the cognitive aspect of ethical decision making by the use of priming. Priming by definition means the "mental activation of a concept by some means" (Ashcraft, 1989). The primary device used was Paulhus' (1988) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Version 6-Form 40 (BIDR) which measures social desirability and impression management. The notion behind using the BIDR as a priming manipulation was to make subjects cognitively aware of themselves as social beings subject to social influences which should have an impact on their ethical decision making behavior. We were also interested in the status of the person in the organization who committed the unethical act would influence the subjects on ethical decision making behavior.

Method

Subjects. A total of 51 male and female undergraduate psychology students enrolled at the University of Georgia participated in the study. Every student that participated

earned credit toward fulfillment of a mandatory course requirement.

Procedure. Subjects engaged in an inbasket decision making exercise similar to the exercise designed by Linda Trevino (Trevino & Youngblood, 1990). The inbasket exercise included an organizational chart, a company newsletter and other letters and memos. Two of the memos involved ethical concerns while the others were used to mask the ethics focus of the study. Response forms that corresponded to each of the letters and memos were included to provide a measure of ethical decision making.

Independent Variables. Priming manipulation -- Paulhus' (1988) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Version 6-Form 40 (BIDR) was used as the priming manipulation. The BIDR measures self-deceptive positivity and impression management variables by respondents rating their agreement with each statement on a 7 pt. scale ranging from not true (1) to very true (7). BIDR-IM items measure deliberate self-presentation to an audience; overreporting performance on desirable behavior and underreporting undesirable behavior. BIDR-SD items measure the tendency to give self reports that are honest but positively biased (Paulhus, 1988).

Subjects were randomly assigned to priming and no priming groups. The subjects in the priming group completed the BIDR prior to the inbasket exercise, whereas the no priming group completed the BIDR after finishing the inbasket decision making exercise.

Organizational level manipulation- for one of the ethical

decision problems the organizational level of the person responsible for the act was either the same as that of the subject or at a higher organizational level.

Dependent Variable. Ethical decision making (dv) was based on the subjects choice behavior in the two ethical decision opportunities. Subjects were considered unethical if they made at least one unethical choice, given two opportunities. They were considered ethical if they made an ethical choice in both situations. For each decision, subjects provided a response as to what action they would take from the list of options. The options were coded as ethical or unethical decisions based on pre-established criteria (Trevino & Youngblood, 1990).

Results & Discussion

The scores were based on subjects' ethical decision making choices in the two inbasket decisions involving ethical concerns. A 2X2 analysis of variance revealed that a significant interaction was present between person and priming. The analysis yielded an F value of 5.32 (with 1 and 47 degrees of freedom), $p = .025$. The results revealed that there was no significant main effect for priming, $F\ (1, 47) = 2.33$, $p > .05$ and no significant main effect for person, $F\ (1, 47) = 1.15$, $p > .05$.

Examination of the means suggested that when subjects were primed they were most likely to act ethically when someone at their own organizational level was the wrongdoer. However, subjects who were not primed were more likely to act ethically when someone at a higher organizational level was the wrongdoer. This suggests that when respondents are primed to think of

themselves as social objects that they may in turn view the unethical acts of more powerful others a bit more delicately. However, in the absence of cuing of one's own vulnerability, it may be that creating the impending fall of a superior from a higher place (a classical definition of the word tragedy) is a better source of personal satisfaction in blowing the whistle.

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